Statement of
Ambassador (ret.) Mark R. Parris
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Hearings on "U.S. - Turkish Relations"
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to appear again before this Committee.

It is no secret to anyone in this room that these have not been the best of times for U.S. - Turkish relations. Time will tell whether they are the worst. But there is no question that in recent years, and particularly in recent months, something seems seriously to have gone wrong in our bilateral relations with Turkey. I commend the leadership of this Committee for taking the initiative to shine some light on that phenomenon.

For it must be said that discussion in this country of recent strains in U.S. - Turkish relations has thus far generated more heat than light. Too often, the issue has been posed in terms of "Who lost Turkey?" A rather stark conventional wisdom has evolved to describe what has occurred. In simplest terms, it goes something like this:

- On March 1, 2003, after a series of mistakes by both sides, Turkey let the U.S. down when its Parliament failed to authorize U.S. forces to attack Iraq from Turkish soil.
- In the months thereafter, and particularly in late 2004, lurid Turkish media coverage of events in Iraq, abetted for their own purposes by nationalist and other political elements there, fueled an unprecedented upsurge of anti-American sentiment.
- The AKP government under Prime Minister Erdogan proved unwilling or unable to confront the rising anti-American tide, which became tinged with anti-Semitism, and coincided with apparent Turkish overtures to problematic countries like Iran and Syria.
- Anti-Americanism ultimately reached a point where it became an issue between the two governments, and began to draw criticism of Turkey from traditional supporters here.
- Stunned by the U.S. reaction, Ankara in recent weeks began to take steps to get things back on track.

As in most such cases, the conventional wisdom is not so much wrong as inadequate. It gives a better sense of "what" has happened than "why." It doesn't give due weight to countervailing, positive things that were happening during the same period. It leads too easily to a conclusion that key actors on both sides were either incompetent or devious. But, most important, it fails to tell us what needs to change if we are to do better in the future.

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With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to review five factors that may give a more complete picture of a how a relationship that seemed so solidly founded just a few years ago seems so swiftly and dramatically to have come unglued.

(1) Distraction

The first such factor has been, throughout the period concerned, a high degree of distraction among major players. I am convinced that no one in a position of responsibility on either side wanted -- or wants -- U.S. - Turkish relations to get worse. Those involved were in the main neither incompetent nor devious. What they were, unquestionably, was distracted.

This shouldn't be a news. After all, the United States post 9/11 was trying to do a lot of difficult things all at once; the AKP leadership during the same period was first winning a watershed election and then setting up a government. But distraction on both sides was probably worst in the period when U.S. - Turkish relations were moving toward free fall during the second half of last year. President Bush and his senior advisors were focused on Presidential elections and their aftermath. Prime Minister Erdogan and his team were making the final push to get a starting date for EU membership talks. Both were existential political challenges. During this period, U.S. - Turkish relations were simply not on the screen of top leaders in Washington or Ankara.

It was thus left to the bureaucracies on both sides to manage as best they could. Unfortunately, and despite heroic efforts by people like Eric Edelman in Ankara and Faruk Logoglu here, the bureaucracies were not up to the task. At this level, too, distraction was a factor. American officials in the agencies that might have been able to respond to Turkey's core concerns on Iraq had their hands full warding off disaster from one day to the next. Requests that seemed entirely legitimate in Ankara, e.g., opening a new border gate with Iraq, seemed like irritating complications in Baghdad's Green Zone or CENTCOM headquarters.

(2) Structural Dysfunction

But at least as important a factor as distraction at this level was a second, structural issue. It was not that U.S. and Turkish representatives were not communicating during this period. Too often, however, the people talking to one another were not the right people. Part of the reason for that problem relates to the U.S. practice of putting Turkey for bureaucratic purposes in the European Bureau of the State Department or EUCOM, and of the limited ability of those institutions to address issues in Iraq. Part of it was the well-documented inability of our State and Defense Departments to work from the same script. Part of it was a tendency, particularly on the Turkish side, but mirrored to some degree on the American, to use unofficial channels unable, at the end of the day, to deliver. Whatever the causes, the result was confusion and growing frustration among those on both sides with responsibility for managing relations, and a corresponding decline in both mutual confidence and readiness to go the extra mile.

(3) Shrinking Constituencies

Contributing to the structural problem was a third and broader factor: a contraction on both sides in the number of official and unofficial stakeholders in the relationship. In contrast to the late nineties, when a wide and growing array of U.S. agencies were eager to expand their programs to Turkey, official bilateral contacts narrowed after 2000. Even well established institutions like the Joint Economic Commission simply stopped meeting. Meanwhile the 2001 Turkish economic crisis and unresolved commercial issues dimmed American business enthusiasm for

Turkey at a time when Turkey's own bureaucratic and economic focus was naturally gravitating toward Europe. This left the bilateral relationship focused on tough, divisive issues like Iraq, without the natural shock-absorbers provided by a broader, cooperative agenda.

(4) Divergent Diplomacy

A fourth factor that needs to be cited is the reality that Turkey's foreign policy priorities under the AKP diverge in significant ways from those of its predecessors. Since coming to office, the current government has pursued what it refers to as greater "strategic depth" through a foreign policy that is self-consciously more "multi-faceted" than in the past. This has meant in practice an effort to deepen relations with all Turkey's immediate neighbors, including some, like Iran and Syria, out of favor with the Bush Administration. It has also meant reaching out to non-traditional partners like China, Russia, South Africa, or Latin America. The ultimate objective of this shift in emphasis is not altogether clear, at least to me. But one consequence has been a de facto de-emphasis in Ankara of traditional relationships such as those with the U.S. and Israel.

It is worth noting that, a year ago, observers in both the U.S. and Turkey were speculating that the Bush Administration's developing interest in finding ways to promote reform in the Muslim world might create a new context for coordinated U.S. - Turkish diplomacy there. It hasn't worked out that way. Instead, while both Ankara and Washington appear to believe that Turkey's Muslim identity gives it an exceptionalist role in its surrounding region and the greater Middle East, it has proved difficult to turn that notion into a basis for joint action.

(5) Local Politics

The final factor I would like to mention is one that will be familiar to the members of this Committee: local politics. As in many other countries, the Bush Administration has had an image problem in Turkey from the day it became clear the President was going to war in Iraq. That image problem grew worse in 2004 as the security situation in Iraq deteriorated, as Turkish concerns there were not addressed, and, frankly, as it appeared to many in Turkey that John Kerry might be the next President. Under the circumstances, and focusing on his EU end game, Prime Minister Erdogan and his advisors -- rightly or wrongly -- may have seen little percentage in using political capital to stem the tide of anti-Americanism picking up steam last fall.

Add it up, Mr. Chairman, and I think the factors of distraction, structural impediments to communication, shrinking constituencies, diverging diplomatic emphases, and local politics make it easier to understand the strains we have seen in U.S. - Turkish relations of late.

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What lessons should we draw from this. And where do we go from here?

A first lesson is that this relationship -- even less than most -- doesn't run on autopilot. Turkey's importance to the U.S. is different in many ways than during the Cold War or the nineties. The same can be said of America's importance to Turkey. But there is still far more that unites us than divides us. Under almost any imaginable circumstances, the two countries will find it easier

and more fruitful to work together than at cross purposes. What the last two years have shown, however, is that if George Bush and Recip Taip Erdogan don't make working together a priority, their bureaucracies will find other priorities.

The good news is that both sides seem to have figured this out. It was heartening that Condoleeza Rice on her first trip abroad came to Ankara: Colin Powell conspicuously did not stop in Turkey on his initial outing four years before. For his part, Prime Minister Erdogan has recently taken steps, including a very important address last month to his parliamentary group, that have emphasized his personal commitment to a strong U.S. - Turkish relationship. So perhaps both sides' first string has finally taken the field.

That is a necessary but not sufficient condition to getting it right in the next half. For a second lesson we should have learned is that words alone are not enough to keep this relationship on track, even when they come from the first string. George Bush, after all, made a very good speech about U.S. - Turkish relations in Istanbul last June -- to no apparent effect whatsoever.

At the end of the day, bilateral relations will be good when leaders on each side can point to something concrete the other has done for it lately. The Prime Minister's recent actions, including approving a long-pending U.S. request for expanded access to Incirlik airbase and the award to Lockheed Martin of a major new defense contract are certainly welcome in that regard. He and others in Turkey will now look to the United States to follow through on commitments we have made on issues like the PKK in Iraq or easing the economic isolation of Turkish Cypriots. If the President gives the word, creative minds will find the means.

A final lesson is that both sides need as an urgent priority to expand the substance of the relationship beyond problematic issues like Iraq. Again, my experience is that this doesn't happen unless top leaders on both sides insist on it. America and Turkey today need to have an honest, concrete discussion, by people with the requisite authority, of our respective priorities in the region and in the world. Where our interests coincide, we need to develop joint action plans and to make serious people responsible for implementing them. Where our interests are not entirely in synch, we need to find ways to de-conflict. We need to get as many official agencies on both sides involved as possible, and we need actively to encourage the development of ties between our business and NGO communities. We need, in short, an agreed, comprehensive, formal bilateral agenda. And the sooner the better.

I draw these conclusions, Mr. Chairman, knowing that they involve some hard work for both sides. But the events of the last year or so have amply demonstrated the consequences of doing less.